

The Song of the Sea

(Exodus 15:1–21)

The Song of the Sea is the first recorded psalm or hymn of the Hebrew nation. It sings praises to God because of his redemptive work of bringing Israel out of the land of death and darkness into freedom. It is a symphony of adoration!

The Song of the Sea is the first of many psalms or songs that extol God's majesty at the exodus event. For example, the psalmist proclaims that:

He saved them for the sake of his name,

That he might make his power known.

Thus he rebuked the Red Sea and it dried up; And he led them through the deeps,

As through the wilderness.

So he saved them from the hand of the one who hated them,

And redeemed them from the hand of the enemy. And the waters covered their adversaries;

Not one of them was left.

Then they believed his words;

They sang his praise

(Ps. 106:8–12).

The reader should also see, in particular, Psalms 78 and 136. The fact is that the Red Sea crossing was for the Hebrew the most important physical redemption in the history of the Old Testament.

The strophic structure of the hymn is straightforward. It is divided into three stanzas: verses 1–6, verses 7–11, and verses 12–16. At the end of each stanza appears the vocative, 'O Yahweh!' to mark the stanza's conclusion. In addition, it should be observed that near the end of each of the three strophes appears a related simile: 'like a stone' (end of v. 5); 'like lead' (end of v. 10); and 'like stone' (end of v. 16). These three stanzas are followed by an epilogue (vv. 17–18) and a responsive refrain (vv. 19–21).

The great antiquity of this song has long been recognized. Various grammatical points in the text will confirm that age.

15:1. Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to Yahweh, and they spoke saying:

'I will sing to Yahweh,
for he is surely exalted;
the horse and its rider,
he has hurled into the sea.'

The opening verses of the stanza set forth the theme of the song: it is a doxology, a hymn of praise and honour to Yahweh. Hymns of the ancient Near East commonly open with such adoration, but usually they are in praise of an earthly king. But here only God is so honoured.

A grammatical construction that begins with 'then' and is followed by an imperfect verb ('sang') indicates that the singing occurred at 'approximately the time when' God destroyed the Egyptian army and they lay strewn on the seashore. In other words, the joyful singing of the Hebrews was spontaneous and an immediate reaction to God's wondrous work. It is as if the people could not help but break forth into song!

'I will sing' is a first person singular verb. But it does not merely refer to Moses; it includes all the men of Israel ('the sons of Israel') in covenant oneness, singing forth the praises of God.

When the Hebrew men sing that Yahweh 'is surely exalted', they are using the same verb twice. It is an infinitive absolute form followed by a perfective form of the verb. Repetition in this type of construction has an intensifying effect—that is, there is no doubt or question regarding the statement made.

15:2.

'And Yahweh is my strength and song,
and he is my salvation.

This is my God and I will praise him,
The God of my father and I will exalt him.'

This verse is classic Hebrew poetry because it contains parallelism and a chiasm. The original word order displays its deliberative construction:

a
b
c
My strength
and song [is]
Yahweh
c1

a1
And he has become to me

for salvation.

a

b
This is my God

and I will praise him,
a1

b1
The God of my father

and I will exalt him.

The name given to the Lord is an abbreviated form of Yahweh, literally, 'yāh'. It only appears in poetry when standing alone. However, often Hebrew names end with -yāh as a suffix: for example, Jeremiah, Hezekiah and Josiah.

The meaning of the word translated 'my song' is unclear. Some scholars argue that it means 'protection/defence' and, therefore, it is in parallel with 'my strength'. Others contend that the word does in fact refer to 'the praise of God in cultic music'. Sarna reasons, unconvincingly, that the word is a double entendre, so that it deliberately means both strength and song.

Attached to the last verb, 'I will exalt him', is a nun energicum, a special connecting syllable linking the verb and the pronominal suffix. Older grammars believed this ending provided intentional emphasis to the action of the verb. That conclusion is probably incorrect; it seems that the form simply reflects an early stage of the Hebrew language. It does, however, confirm the great antiquity of the poem.

See the commentary on 3:6 regarding the phrase, 'God of my father'.

This verse is quoted in Psalm 118:14 and Isaiah 12:2. It may have attained the status of a confessional statement in later Hebrew religion.

15:3.

'Yahweh is a man of war,
Yahweh is his name.'

Yahweh as a warrior, or 'a man of war', becomes a central biblical motif. Regarding Exodus 15, Longman and Reid comment: 'This poem represents the first explicit statement of the warlike nature of God ... this theme of God as a warrior became a recurrent refrain in the Old Testament. The Exodus event itself became an important archetype in the biblical tradition, a means of telling and retelling God's acts of

deliverance. God often dramatically revealed himself to the Israelites as the one who saved them from physical harm. He fought against their enemies.’

The ‘name’ of this warrior is ‘Yahweh’. The basis of this declaration is the recognition by Israel of who it is that fights for them. They have seen his power and his majesty with their own eyes, and they are convinced and convicted—at least for now.

15:4.

‘The chariots of Pharaoh and his army
he has cast into the sea;
and his chosen officers
have drowned in the Red Sea.’

The structure of this verse of poetry is a complete synonymous parallelism:

a

b

c

The chariots of Pharaoh and his army
he has thrown
in the sea.

a

b

c

His chosen officers
have sunk
in the Red Sea.

Parallelism, or repetition of lines (technically known as cola), is principally for the purpose of emphasis in poetry. The fate or end of the Egyptian army is here being accentuated.

For commentary on the identity of the ‘officers’, see 14:7.

15:5.

‘Deeps cover them,
they went down into the depths like a stone.’

‘Deeps’ is the same word as in Genesis 1:2: ‘... and darkness was over the surface of the deep.’ Some scholars have attempted to find a parallel with Mesopotamian creation accounts. In those myths a goddess appears whose name is Tiamat, a term that some say is related to the Hebrew t’hôm, ‘deep’. Tiamat was a mighty foe of the Mesopotamian creator-god Marduk, and she had to be vanquished before creation could occur. According to this theory, at creation and at the Red Sea, Yahweh is the Creator God who is conquering the chaos deity Tiamat. What lies behind the biblical account is a pagan world-order. In reality, the equation of Mesopotamian Tiamat and Hebrew t’hom is at best dubious. Unfortunately, it has come to be regarded as fact in much recent literature.

Rare endings appear on the verb ‘covered’ and on the preposition ‘like’. They are old forms that reflect the antiquity of the hymn of the sea.

15:6.

‘Your right hand, O Yahweh, was majestic in power,
your right hand, O Yahweh, shattered the enemy.’

The poetical symmetry of this verse is obvious. It is, however, a complete synthetic parallelism: that is, each line, or colon, contains the same number of components but a new or more detailed idea is added to the second line.

a

b

c

Your right hand
O Yahweh
was glorious in power.

a1

b1

c1

Your right hand
O Yahweh
shattered the enemy.

The second line helps to define the first line and, therefore, God's destruction of the Egyptian army explains what is meant by his right hand being 'majestic/glorious in power'.

Hebrew culture places great importance on the right hand. It symbolizes power, pre-eminence and strength. Here it signifies the power of God as an instrument to deliver his people:

O sing to Yahweh a new song,
for he has done wonderful things,
his right hand and his holy arm
have gained the victory for him

(Ps. 98:1).

Connected to the word 'majestic' is a remnant of an early case-ending known as a hireq compaginis. This also points to the antiquity of the Song of the Sea.

15:7.

'In the greatness of your majesty,
you overthrew those who rose up against you.
You sent forth your burning anger,
it consumed them like stubble.'

The second stanza of the hymn begins in much the same way as the first. In fact, the term 'majesty' is a noun derivative of the verb 'to rise up'. The latter verb occurs twice in the first stanza as 'highly exalted'. The 'burning anger' of God is used exclusively of divine anger and fury in the Old Testament.

The simile, 'It consumed them like stubble,' is a prominent figure in the Bible describing the end of the wicked (Isa. 40:24; 41:2; Jer. 13:24; Ps. 83:13). What makes the figure so potent in the present context is the fact that 'stubble' was what the Hebrews had to gather to make bricks in Egypt (see 5:12). Now the Egyptian army is consumed like stubble!

15:8.

'And at the blast of your nostrils,
the waters were piled up;
the floods stood firm like a heap;
the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.'

'Blast' is actually the common Hebrew word for 'wind'. It certainly refers to the east wind from 14:21. The great dividing blow is not of natural origin, but comes from the very nostrils of God.

The resulting action is narrated by three lines of synonymous parallelism (following in the word order of the Masoretic Text):

a

b

They piled up
the waters;

a1

c

b1

They stood firm
like a heap
the floods;

a2

b2

d

They congealed
the deep waters
in the heart of the sea.

The first verb appears only here in the Old Testament. It is in the Niphal pattern (i.e. it is passive), and it means 'to be heaped up'. Its noun derivative describes a heap of grain or of rubbish (Ruth 3:7; Neh. 4:2). The second verb (also in Niphal) means 'to take an upright position/to stand firm'. In cognate languages, a related word is used of statues and monuments that do not move. The line is sometimes translated to say the waters 'stood firm like a wall', but the noun is better rendered as a 'heap' (see Josh. 3:13, 16; Ps. 78:13). In Isaiah 17:11, the term denotes a heap of grain. That translation aligns well with the parallel of the first line.

The third verb conveys the idea of something thickening/condensing/congealing. Job 10:10 describes the curdling of cheese by using this verb. Cross and Freedman contend that the verbal form actually means 'to churn', which would be the exact opposite of the traditional translation. Their definition destroys the sense and symmetry of the threefold parallelism and is, therefore, unnecessary.

15:9.

'The enemy said:

"I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil;
my life will be filled with them;
I will draw out my sword,
my hand will destroy them."

In these boastings of the Egyptians, five verbs appear in relative succession. They are not connected by conjunctions. This is vigorous poetic imagery that Gesenius calls *constructio asyndetos*. Its purpose is as 'a rhetorical expedient to produce a hurried and so an impassioned description'. An exalted poetic style is the result of the verse's construction.

Poetic form is further accentuated by alliteration. The first five words of the verse begin with the Hebrew letter aleph.

The verbs for 'gorge/fill' and 'destroy' each end with an enclitic *mem*. This form was common in the early stages of the Hebrew language, but its usage died out over time. Remnants still can be seen in poetry. The meaning of the construction is uncertain, although it may have an emphatic force. In any event, its repeated appearance points to the antiquity of the poem.

15:10.

'But you blew with your breath,
the sea covered them;
they sank like lead
in the mighty waters.'

A conceptual parallel exists between this verse and verse 5 of the opening stanza. In both cases, the waters of the Red Sea envelop (the same verb in Hebrew, 'to cover') the Egyptians, and the army subsequently sinks into the watery depths. Pleonasm and parallelism serve to emphasize the point.

The verb 'to sink' is a hapax legomenon. Perhaps it is related to the verb with the same root that means 'to be or grow dark'. Darkness in the Old Testament can symbolize being near to death (Ps. 102:11; 109:23). Thus, the verb may be translated, 'They sank into the darkness/abyss.'

'Breath' is a word meaning 'wind'. It is a reference to verse 8 of this chapter, and to the east wind of chapter 14.

The description of the waters is that they are 'mighty'. That word really means 'majestic/magnificent'. The waters are reflecting the character of the Creator (Ps. 18:1; and especially Ps. 93:3–4).

15:11.

'Who is like you among the gods, O Yahweh?

Who is like you?

Majestic in holiness,
awesome in praises,
performing wonders.'

This second stanza concludes in the same manner as the final verse of the opening one: with glowing praise and adoration of Yahweh. The parallel nature of the two verses is confirmed by the fact that the word 'majestic' is a focus of both.

Two rhetorical questions are asked in the verse. No answer is expected. The response is obvious: no one is like Yahweh! Truly, who can be compared to Yahweh from among the pagan deities? Can the gods of Egypt, who failed to deliver their worshippers?

Some translators want to render 'holiness' as a plural noun, 'holy ones'. That rendering is in agreement with the Septuagint. However, the Masoretic Text makes perfect sense as it stands and thus is in no need of emendation. 'Holiness' in Hebrew culture means 'to be set apart/distinct/unique', and indeed Yahweh is majestic in his wholly otherness. He is like nothing else.

15:12.

'You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.'

This final stanza describes the results of the Red Sea crossing. First, what God has done is relayed in terms similar to what Moses had been commanded to do—in 14:16, Yahweh told Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea. That terminology is now being used in relation to God because he is the one who truly had the power to open and close the waters.

The consequence of God's work is that the earth 'swallowed' the Egyptian army. In Exodus 7:12, that same verb is used of Aaron's staff swallowing the rods of the Egyptian magicians. Ancient Near-Eastern literature often employs the act of swallowing to signify desolation and death. In Egyptian magic, 'The act can serve a principally hostile function, whereby "devour" signifies "to destroy."'

The verb 'swallowed' is an imperfective form. According to Driver, the imperfect expresses progressive duration. Gesenius assumes that the use of that form in the present verse 'represents the Egyptians, in a vivid, poetic description, as being swallowed up one after another'.

The word 'earth' sometimes means 'Sheol', or 'the place of the dead' (Isa. 14:9; 29:4; Jonah 2:6). Other ancient Near-Eastern literature draws the same conclusion.

15:13.

'You lead by your loving-kindness
the people that you have redeemed;
you guide by your power
to your holy dwelling.'

Another synthetic parallelism arises in this verse. In the order of the Masoretic Text it looks like this:

- a
- b
- c

You lead
by your lovingkindness
the people that you have redeemed.

a1

b1

d

You guide
by your power
to your holy dwelling.

The Hebrew word translated 'that' is a demonstrative pronoun being used as a relative pronoun. This form appears exclusively in Hebrew poetry.

The Hebrew word for 'loving-kindness' denotes 'covenant loyalty', that is, God's keeping of the covenant promises he made to his people. Indeed, this fidelity to his covenant refers back to the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and it continues to the present.

The identity of the 'holy dwelling/habitation' is ambiguous. Some commentators believe it may refer to the promised land, on the basis of passages such as Jeremiah 10:25; 23:3 and Psalm 79:7. Others argue it is specifically alluding to the temple mount on Mount Zion (2 Sam. 15:25; Isa. 27:10). Verse 17 of the present chapter lends great support to this position. On the other hand, the reference may simply be to Mount Sinai (see commentary on 3:12).

15:14–15.

'Peoples have heard, they tremble;
writhing seizes the dwellers of Philistia;
the chiefs of Edom are terrified;
trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;
the dwellers of Canaan melt away.'

A further consequence of the incident at the Red Sea is that pagan peoples will be told what has happened and they will be afraid. Four countries are specifically mentioned, and they are listed in a poetic parallel structure (based upon the Masoretic Text):

Line 1

a

b

c

Writhing
seizes
the dwellers of Philistia;
Line 2

b1

c1

are terrified
the chiefs of Edom.

Line 3

c2

a1

b2

The leaders of Moab

trembling

seizes them.

Line 4

b3

c3

They melt away

the dwellers of Canaan.

The order in which the nations are listed follows the geographical sequence of the route the Hebrews will use to travel to the promised land: Philistia—Edom—Moab—Canaan.

All four nations were to become notorious enemies of Israel. Philistia was located in the coastal plain of Palestine, and the Philistines often fought with Israel during the early centuries of her existence (e.g., Judg. 13–15; 1 Sam. 4–7). The Edomites were descended from Esau, and they populated the area of southern Transjordan. They struggled with Israel in order not to let her pass through their territory (Num. 20). Moab, in central Transjordan, was the home of the descendants of Lot. Balak was one of the kings of Moab during the conquest period, and he strongly resisted Israel (Num. 22). The Canaanites, of course, inhabited the land of promise, and many of them were destroyed by the Hebrew invasion of Palestine. Attached to the end of the verb ‘tremble’ is a nun paragogicum (or a ‘flying nun’!). The purpose of the ending in poetic text is uncertain. It is true, however, that it is more common in earlier texts than later ones.

The same word is used for the ‘people’ of Philistia and the ‘people’ of Canaan: literally, ‘the dwellers/sitters of’. It may, in fact, refer to those sitting on thrones, or the leaders of those peoples (see Exod. 11:5; 12:29). That rendering would fit better with the four-part parallelism of the verse.

15:16.

‘Terror and dread will fall upon them;

by the strength of your arm,

they will be as still as a stone;

until your people pass by, O Yahweh;

until the people whom you have purchased pass by.’

A few minor grammatical points help to show the emphatic force of this final verse of the third stanza.

First, the word ‘terror’ has an early accusative ending (called the accusative of intention) which serves the goal of poetical emphasis. Second, ‘strength’ translates an adjectival construction which usually conveys a superlative force. Gesenius comments that ‘The adjective which is made into a regens is strongly emphatic, and is frequently equivalent to a superlative.’

The translation, ‘They will be still’, has been challenged. Some scholars want to repoint the verb and make it into a Niphal (passive) reading, ‘They will be struck dumb as a stone.’ Dahood suggests it comes from a different word altogether that means ‘to throw/hurl’. And, thus, he sees an echo here of verse 5. However, the reasons advanced for altering the Masoretic Text from its present state are noticeably weak. The power of Yahweh’s arm should be seen in the light of Egyptian texts that characteristically describe Pharaoh’s might in the same way (see commentary on 3:19–20).

The verb ‘to purchase’ sometimes bears the sense of originating/creating (see Gen. 4:1; 14:19, 22; Deut. 32:6). This meaning supports the idea that the crossing of the Red Sea is a re-creation event. See analysis of 14:29.

15:17.

‘You will bring them in and plant them

on the mountain of your inheritance;

the place that you have made for your dwelling, O Yahweh;
the sanctuary, O Lord, established by your hands.’

This epilogue looks even further into the future when God will establish Israel in the land of promise. The Hebrews will build a sanctuary there to worship Yahweh. The designation of a mountain obviously refers to Mount Zion where the temple will ultimately reside.

It is unnecessary to suppose that this reference to the mountain means that the song must have been written after the Israelites had settled in the land. It may simply indicate intention rather than accomplishment (see 23:20; 32:34).

The parallel designations

a

b

on the mountain of
your inheritance,

a1

b1

the place of
your dwelling,

are well-attested in Ugaritic literature of the fourteenth century B.C. This formula refers in those instances to the sanctuary of the Canaanite god Baal. The use of this expression, however, does not indicate borrowing on the part of the Hebrew writer. It is more likely that it has a polemical thrust. In any event, because of these early attestations, some scholars leave the door open for an early dating of verse 17 and for the entire poem.

15:18.

‘Yahweh will reign for ever and ever.’

The song ends as it began—with the glorification of Yahweh. He is the subject of the hymn. As all begins with him, all ends with him. Yahweh is the eternal King!

15:19. When the horses of Pharaoh and his chariots and his cavalry went into the sea, Yahweh returned the waters of the sea upon them. And the children of Israel went on the dry ground in the midst of the sea. Although this verse is not part of the song—it is narrative prose—it is the writer’s summing up of the Red Sea crossing. It simply and concisely gives a synopsis of the grand event of Israel’s history.

15:20. Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.

The Song of Miriam in the next verse is introduced by this prose passage. This is the first time that Miriam is mentioned by name in the Bible. She is probably the sister anonymously designated in 2:4–9, although that is not completely certain.

Miriam is identified by two titles. She is, firstly, called a ‘prophetess’ (feminine ending). Only four other women in the Old Testament bear that epithet: Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) and the unnamed wife of Isaiah (Isa. 8:3). The position and duty of a prophetess are the same as those of a prophet—that is, as one who is authorized to speak for another (see Micah 6:4). Thus Miriam had a favoured status in the nation of Israel. Her prophetic function (along with Aaron’s) was later to lead to great problems (Num. 12:1–2).

Secondly, Miriam is recognized as ‘Aaron’s sister’. This is a biblical example of patriarchy, in which authority in the family is invested in the eldest brother.

The word translated ‘tambourine’ is actually a framedrum. Whenever that instrument is used in connection with dancing in the Old Testament it appears to reflect a genre known as the ‘Victory Song’.

15:21. And Miriam answered them:

‘Sing to Yahweh,
for he is surely exalted;
the horse and its rider,

he has hurled into the sea.’

A direct translation of the opening clause is: ‘And Miriam answered them ...’ The pronominal suffix ‘them’ is a masculine plural, and thus refers to Moses and the men of Israel. Because the song is an answer/response to the men, then the women were singing antiphonally with the men. The content of the song is exactly the same as verse 1 of the chapter, the opening of the first stanza of the Song of Moses. Apparently this passage served as a refrain to the larger hymn.

Application

After crossing the waters, the victorious people of Israel stood by the sea and sang a song of deliverance and triumph. This event was a foreshadowing of the victory of God’s redeemed at the end of time. In Revelation 15:1–4, the apostle John has the following vision: ‘I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.

Just and true are your ways,

King of the ages.

Who will not fear you, O Lord,

and bring glory to your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come

and worship before you,

for your righteous acts have been revealed.” ’

Thus John sees a sea, and on the seashore stands a victorious multitude. They are playing harps and singing the Song of Moses. Hendriksen comments, ‘Clearly, this vision is based on the story of the drowning of Pharaoh’s host in the Red Sea.’

So the church in covenant will at the end times sing hymns of adoration before the throne of God. One of those hymns will be the Song of the Sea from Exodus 15. And note that the subject matter is the same in Exodus and in Revelation: the glorification of God. He is worthy of the church’s honour and praise because of who he is, and because of his great redemptive work. Amen and amen.

Parallels between Israel at the sea and the church at the sea are striking. The general theological thrust of the two episodes is similar as well: as Israel moves from a scene of redemption to communion at the sea and on to inheritance of the land of promise, so does the church. The church has been redeemed by the blood of Christ; it communes at the sea in Revelation 15 and, finally, it receives an eternal inheritance that is imperishable and will never fade away (1 Peter 1:4).